

Interpersonal Influence in Cross-Cultural Interactions

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SUMMARY

Defence organizations have to meet the challenge of a changed focus in military missions towards asymmetric and irregular warfare and Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) operations. A range of operations (e.g., psychological operations, humanitarian missions) are performed in a large variety of locations and cultures (e.g., Africa, Asia). In this type of mission, influencing target audiences is one of the (many) methods available to achieve the desired effects. Cultural differences between practitioners and the target audiences could have a negative impact upon influencing activities. To achieve effective interpersonal interactions in cross-cultural military operations, insight is needed into determinants of successful interpersonal interactions. This paper discusses a generic theoretical framework of cross-cultural interactions that can be used as guidance during military missions. The framework is based on an extensive literature study and interviews with UK military practitioners, and is focussed on UK-Afghanistan interactions.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

"...They were our first contacts in town. Goal was to establish the hierarchy in town. It is important to get to know the place and what the place needs. In that town lived seven tribes and they came from everywhere. The tribes got along well, opposed to what we thought (and what we learned). We spoke to everyone that would stop and talk to us when we were on patrol. Sometimes we called a shura. About 50 people would come. Other shuras were privately held in the office of the head of the police. Goal was to build up trust. That we are there to help. We didn't take into account the tribe they were from. We treated them as a person." Commander interviewed in 2010

Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Afghanistan, military commanders have been meeting important local officials. These Key Leader Engagements (KLEs) have aided commanders by establishing relationships to gain understanding, build confidence, gather or share information, and manage perceptions. KLE can be seen as a method of exerting a variety of influence activities targeted at winning hearts and minds and thus changing attitudes and behaviour. It is feasible that interactions such as KLE could induce behavioural change such that prior neutral or even hostile behaviour of leaders or groups is transformed into more constructive activities. Thus, it could function as counterinsurgency. Setting the

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14. ABSTRACT Defence organizations have to meet the challenge of a changed focus in military missions towards asymmetric and irregular warfare and Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) operations. A range of operations (e.g., psychological operations, humanitarian missions) are performed in a large variety of locations and cultures (e.g., Africa, Asia). In this type of mission, influencing target audiences is one of the (many) methods available to achieve the desired effects. Cultural differences between practitioners and the target audiences could have a negative impact upon influencing activities. To achieve effective interpersonal interactions in cross-cultural military operations, insight is needed into determinants of successful interpersonal interactions. This paper discusses a generic theoretical framework of cross-cultural interactions that can be used as guidance during military missions. The framework is based on an extensive literature study and interviews with UK military practitioners, and is focussed on UK-Afghanistan interactions.					
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conditions to attain those transitions requires skilful, nuanced dialogue and negotiations. To achieve successful interaction and negotiation, knowledge and training about these processes are essential. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a sound theoretical framework that guides cross-cultural, interpersonal interactions between practitioners and target audiences. The framework is applied to interactions between UK military and Afghan leaders. The work reported here was conducted as part of the Preparing People for Operations Programme, funded by the Human Capability Domain of the UK Ministry of Defence Scientific Research Programme.

Knowledge of and training in social interaction is vital, particularly in an intercultural setting. Cultural advisers are now often part of the military teams; they provide information about cultural norms, practices and expectations. However, although knowledge of norms and practices is important, fact-oriented cultural information does not suffice (Girndt & Poortinga, 1997; Shiraev & Levy, 2004). What is necessary is an understanding of the generic psychological processes, transcending specific cultures, that play a role in interactions. These processes involve potential influence techniques but also pitfalls and risks associated with interactions in an intercultural setting and in interaction in general. The theoretical framework reported in the current paper is based on a literature review of available scientific theories on interpersonal interactions from research fields ranging from social psychology and cross-cultural psychology to sociology and anthropology. This analysis was integrated into a generic theoretical framework that incorporates relevant sociological and psychological dimensions underpinning interpersonal interactions and factors relating to their applicability across cultures. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five UK military practitioners with relevant operational experience to gain a deeper insight into the factors that influence KLE.

2.0 KEY LEADER ENGAGEMENT

The social interaction in Key Leader Engagement has the goal of reducing the incidence and possibility of insurgency, and to enhance relations with local populations. As such, KLE has a broader scope than negotiations, which are predominantly focused on bargaining and resolving disputes (e.g., interaction during a hostage situation). KLE comprises any social interaction with the local population. It can be initiated in a formal way by a request for a dialogue from a commander to a tribal leader. However, a situation where a soldier interacts with locals on a mission can also be thought of as KLE. Thus, KLE can be performed by individuals of any rank and may occur after thorough preparation or in a more spontaneous manner. The relationship with the interaction partner can also vary. It can consist of civil–military parties, but also of military–military parties. In addition, the status of the interaction partners can be equal or unequal. The latter is the case in, for example, training and mentoring situations where there is a master–pupil relation. Thus, KLE comprises a vast variety of interactions (see Curtis, 2008).

That being said, there are aspects of KLE that are relatively invariable. First, the interaction takes place in an intercultural setting. Second, the interaction is part of an armed conflict, with the local population on the one hand, and the operational forces (non-locals) on the other. Third, the duration of the KLE with the same interaction partners will be restricted by the length of the tour. Finally, the task of the mission requires the international forces to switch between two almost opposing means to attain goals: sometimes military force is necessary, whereas at other times traditional warfare is replaced by counterinsurgency through social interactions such as KLE. This requires the practitioner to be able to execute the difficult task of switching between these roles. In addition, this latter aspect implies that the way in which the local population is viewed must be multidimensional. For instance, one should be able to see that the ‘bad guys’ can transition into ‘good guys’ or that the ‘bad guys’ are not only ‘bad’ (Hull, 2009). Together, these characteristics of KLE imply that social interactions are more complicated than common social interactions (i.e., interaction between people of the same culture, free from a situation that complicates relations). This is why, to attain the desired end state, it is vital to use a structured approach while performing KLE.

We argue that the interaction benefits from an understanding of how one perceives both the interaction partner and oneself during social interactions. We do this by presenting a framework that represents these interactions. This framework can be used both before and during interaction, to identify and to learn to recognise different levels in the interaction. These levels can in turn be used to steer the interaction to attain the desired end state. It is this phase that can be used to convey a desire for future KLE interactions, which is important when a more enduring relationship is envisaged.

3.0 KEY LEADER ENGAGEMENT

Key leader engagement is a form of social interaction. Ideally, KLE results in a perfect understanding of each other and in the fulfilment of the goals of both parties. Unfortunately, this is not always the case: besides the fact that the goals of parties in KLE (for example, a UK commander and Afghan police officer) are sometimes not fully compatible, a major concern is miscommunication. Mutual understanding in an interaction such as KLE in Afghanistan is hampered by comprehension (i.e., translation errors), but also because of more general psychological processes influencing the interaction such as ethnocentrism and stereotyping (Shiraev & Levy, 2004). These processes are thought to be universally applicable (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002), but might impact upon the perception of the self and the interaction partner, and the interaction process as a whole (see Figure 1).

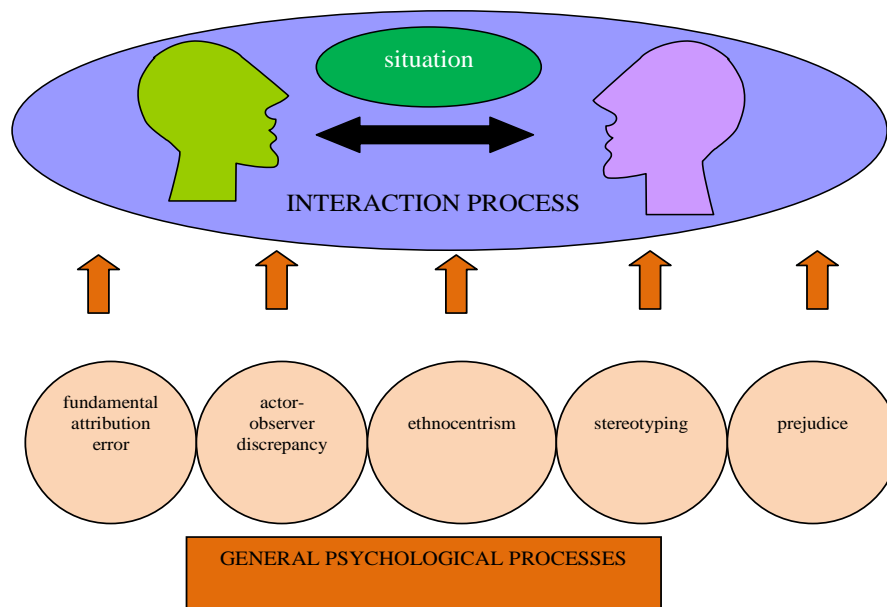


Figure 1: Framework of intercultural interactions in KLE.

3.1 General Psychological Processes

One general psychological process involves the tendency of having a more positive outlook on our own group than on other groups because we look at the world primarily from the perspective of our own culture. This tendency toward *ethnocentrism* is very pervasive and found in all human groups (Le Vine & Campbell, 1972). Another, related, tendency is known as *stereotyping*, i.e., the perception of each member of a group in terms of characteristics ascribed to that group (Katz & Braly, 1933; Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002). Although this overgeneralisation makes sense in some settings (for example, one can expect certain behaviour from the commander of a team), in other contexts it can be highly inadequate

(Terracciano *et al.*, 2005) and result in, for example, discrimination of certain groups. Stereotypes are often negative, and therefore can obstruct cross-cultural encounters. However, to a certain extent stereotypes are useful as they structure the world around us. When interacting with people from other cultures it is imperative to be aware of the stereotypes that one has about the interaction partner and whether these stereotypes influence one's perception of the other person or his/her behaviour or whether it changes one's behaviour.

3.2 Perceiving the Interaction Partner

A first factor in the interaction process is *perceiving the interaction partner*. The interpretation of interaction partners generally deviates from reality to a certain extent. As a rule, interpretations are accompanied by inaccuracies (Kruglanski, 1989). First impressions shape the way in which we interpret behaviour and interaction. We mentally create a representation of our interaction partner (Figure 2). Three sources of attribution are used in perceiving interaction partners: cultural, social and individual (Figure 3). Besides perceiving the interaction partner as a member of a cultural or national or ethnic group (i.e., cultural level), we can perceive the interaction partner as representing a social group or rank (i.e., social level) or as a person (i.e., individual level).

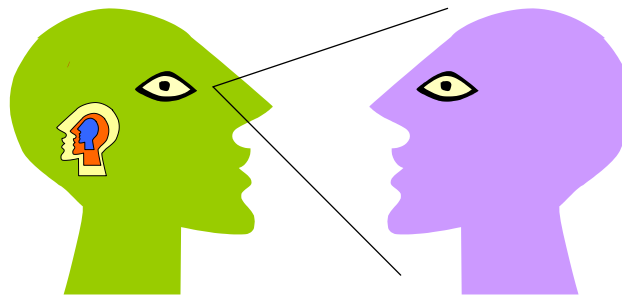


Figure 2: People create a mental representation of the interaction partner.

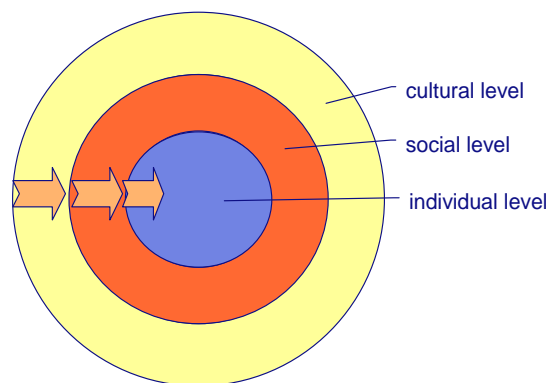


Figure 3: Graphical representation of cultural, social, and individual levels of perceiving the interaction partner. In an intercultural setting, what is often readily perceived is the cultural level, followed by the social level. The individual level requires more effort and time.

The cultural level includes dimensions such as indirect versus direct communication; in collectivist cultures, people are focused on maintaining harmony in interactions, especially within their own group. This might result in more conforming and socially desirable behaviour, and even behaviour that non-collectivist cultures consider to be deceptive (Aune & Waters, 1994); in other words, indirect

communication. In contrast, individualist cultures stress the responsibility of the individual for him- or herself and encourage direct communication (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1990). In addition, behaving honourably and maintaining face is crucial in many societies, such as Afghanistan. Face can be maintained and built by approaching the interaction partner and confirming the relationship (through invitations, compliments), and by allowing one's opponents to make concessions gracefully, without having to admit that they made a mistake or backed down (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). Another important cultural dimension seems to relate to women's position and role. In Arab countries such as Afghanistan women are considered to be subordinate to men; men are responsible for their protection. Suggestions for dealing with women in Afghanistan include respecting women's privacy and protected role, not shaking hands with an Afghan woman unless she offers her hand first or you are a woman, and not asking an Afghan questions about his wife or other female members of his family. Hospitality is another relevant dimension on which cultures differ. In Afghanistan it is related to honour and as such a key value: Treating guests well gives claim to honour. People are expected to share what they have with their guests (Van Bommel, Van Meer, Veldhuis, & Schwerzel, 2008). Finally, in some non-western countries such as Afghanistan time is dealt with in a less rigid way than in western societies. The non-western approach to time is much more relaxed and slower than the western approach. The latter stipulates that deadlines must be met and treats time in a very structured way. It is important to realise that being punctual and planning are not a central asset in many non-western countries such as Afghanistan.

The social level consists of the social groups to which a person belongs, such as tribe, military rank, family, religion, caste, and age group. For example, when interacting with another military person, this will often be the way in which this person is categorised and addressed. These social groups and the corresponding social roles are associated with characteristics that are thought to apply for these groups, in other words, stereotyped. Because in KLE there is sometimes no prior contact with the interaction partner, individual characterisations are not readily available, and hence the observer infers individual characteristics from aspects thought typical for the social group to which the interaction partner belongs. For instance, an older person can be thought of as powerful and wise, a Muslim as radical and violence-prone, and a soldier as obeying orders. Thus, people not only assess character from behaviour; they also interpret behaviour in terms of what they already know or think they know they should do on the basis of the social groups to which the interaction partner belongs (Funder, 1987). This could lead to inferences about behaviour that deviate from reality to a certain extent, hampering the interaction process because one assumes certain behaviour that is not there. This implies that assumptions are violated. For the perceiver, this could result in uneasy, negative feelings and in judging the other unreliable, because he is seen as the cause of the negative feeling. For example, when a British captain has an interaction with a soldier from the Afghan National Army (ANA), he or she tends to assume that the Afghan soldier has similar convictions about orders and obeying them. However, military conventions can be different, caused by different cultural or military norms and values. This is not only a deviation from one's expectations, which leads to negative feelings, but it might also be a violation of one's own military norms and values.

The individual level consists of personal characteristics such as personality (e.g., warmth), attractiveness, personal goals and motivations, skills, and more transient states such as moods, nervousness, and level of agitation (e.g., frustration). As these personal characteristics are located in the 'inner circle' of the interaction partner, they are not always easy to identify: Although some emotions are easy to perceive, people and cultures differ in emotional display rules to which they adhere (Matsumoto, 1996). Therefore, the discrepancy between inner feelings and emotional displays can vary across people, situations, and cultures.

The three levels differ in the extent to which they stand out in the perception of the interaction partner. The individual level is not immediately prominent in person perception: Perceivers generally construe the person according to the cultural or social category (e.g., nationality, gender, and profession) to which they

belong (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000) before acknowledging individual characteristics such as being smart and having an open personality. For example, someone's profession automatically activates characteristics typically associated with this profession. Thus, a soldier is associated with being decisive, disciplined, and obedient. These implied characteristics are then used in the ensuing identification process. One result of this hierarchy is that behaviour in a UK–Afghan KLE tends to be interpreted in terms of the ideas one has of Afghan people in general (including stereotypes and other errors), at first disregarding the notion that not all Afghans are similar in terms of social and individual characteristics.

The hierarchy in perceiving others has various other implications for interpretations during interaction. For instance, because people at first neglect individual factors in their interpretation, they tend to downplay the impact of factors such as emotional states. Thus, whereas someone's ill-tempered behaviour may have been caused by a bad night's sleep, we tend to ascribe this to his culture not allowing displays of joy. In this way, possibilities for engaging in more effective KLE are lost. It is important to keep in mind that the transition from one level to another is gradual instead of direct; some topics and issues are applicable to more than one level. The most predominant cause of an issue determines the level in which it is placed. In particular, the distinction between the cultural and the social level requires some explanation. Although the cultural level incorporates those issues that are relevant for the culture as a whole (i.e., the Afghan culture), the social level incorporates issues and roles that may be more transient. For example, although our culture determines the importance of honour in general, the importance of honour can vary to a certain extent depending on the social role that is most prominent at a certain time (e.g., being a father versus being a translator).

'KLE is personality driven. You tend to play to their personality'

'Lose that frame of mind but see that person'

3.3 The Situation

The second factor relevant in interactions is *the situation at hand*. The situation influences interpretations and communications (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Besides the parties in the interaction, the situation can have a profound impact on the interaction process. One of the most prominent situational influences is the presence of an interpreter, as it results in more indirect interaction. This is apparent in reduced eye contact and other non-verbal behaviour, and more difficulty in understanding each other. This topic is well documented, both in guidelines and in analyses (e.g., Gerrish, Chau, Sobowale, & Birks, 2004; Schmitt, 2002; Wallin & Ahlstrom, 2006). In light of the present framework, two things are important. First, interacting through an interpreter increases the distance between interaction partners, and hence the probability of misinterpretations. It could help to reduce distance by increasing the interaction on a social and individual level. Second, when he is trusted, the knowledge of the interpreter of cultural issues in the interaction could be used to one's advantage.

Various aspects of the situation can be changed to reduce the amount of misinterpretations. Many are quite straightforward, and will be sought automatically. However, sometimes it will be impossible to create the perfect setting for a KLE. It will be even more important to optimise the remaining situational factors. Factors that improve understanding are being well-rested, prepared, and motivated, and minimising distraction, avoiding a risky or dangerous setting, and having enough time scheduled.

These factors are so important because optimising these situational aspects helps to decrease the use of stereotypes to interpret others' behaviour. This, in turn, reduces the chance of making interpretational errors. In general, one could argue that when our mental resources are partly engaged outside the interaction, this is detrimental for communicating and understanding. Because part of our mental capacity is engaged elsewhere, less effort can be put into the interaction process, which is subsequently executed in more superficial ways. Superficial processing leads to more mistakes in interpretations and increases the

use of stereotypes. A similar reasoning holds when the perceiver is tired or mentally occupied for other reasons.

3.4 Perceiving One's Own Role

The third factor is *perceiving one's own role*. Just as the interpretation of interaction partners follows certain psychological patterns, there are patterns in the interpretation of our own behaviour that can impact upon interaction in KLE (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). In KLE, the perception and interpretation of our own role is probably even more important than the interpretation of the interaction partner, because we can shape the interaction process only through our own behaviour. Just as we mentally create a representation of the interaction partner, we also create a representation of ourselves (Figure 4). These representations can lead to misinterpretations. We have a tendency to neglect their impact and the resulting behaviour during KLE. An example is our involuntary non-verbal reaction towards others, such as keeping a distance when someone is perceived to smell badly. The lack of awareness of the consequences of our own biases is vital, because not being aware of our biases implies that we are not able to correct for them. Conversely, simply learning about the impact of our own role already implies that we will be more able to correct for our biasing tendencies, and thus enhance our chances of attaining the desired outcome.

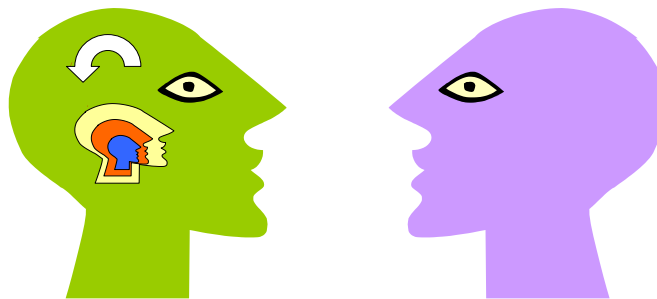


Figure 4: People create a mental representation of themselves.

Imagine the following. One morning, you brush your teeth and notice too late that you have used shaving cream instead of toothpaste; while dressing, your shoe-laces break; and you find that your cup of coffee is cold. It is very likely that such events will create a negative mood or other agitated feelings, shaping the subsequent interaction. Research has shown that these kinds of personal occurrence can have an impact on the full interaction process (Vinokur, Schul, & Caplan, 1987). Luckily, in most circumstances people are very well able to correct for ongoing frustrations caused by irrelevant experiences. However, there are instances where we fail to do this. In these instances, our state of mind influences subsequent interactions, particularly when we are not aware of having a negative state of mind. There are two circumstances in which this happens: (1) we are not aware of our changed mood, or (2) we think that the mood has passed, although a trace of it remains. This phenomenon is known as the excitation transfer of arousal (Zillmann, 1971). Put simply, when we think no alterations in mood are present, we will not correct for them.

The above phenomenon is an example of how our own individual level can influence interaction during KLE. Just as the perception and interpretation of the interaction partner can be described according to the cultural, social and individual level, one's own role can be described accordingly (Figure 5). When soldiers from the ANA who do not follow orders are considered rude, this is an example of how norms and values stemming from our own social group (the military) influence the interaction. Refining these levels can shape our interaction capabilities and can thus enhance awareness of the impact of our own levels on the interaction process.

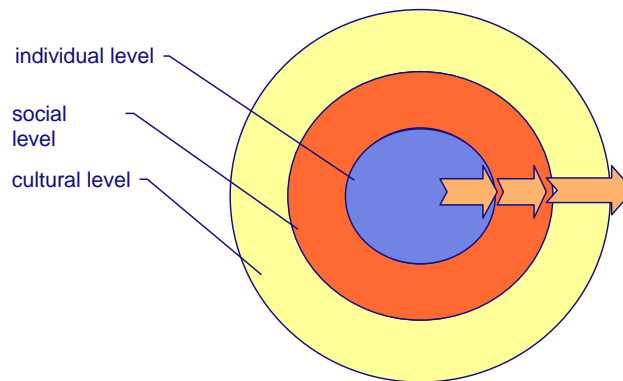


Figure 5: Graphical representation of cultural, social, and individual levels of perceiving one's own role. The role is perceived from the inside to the outside: The individual level is most readily perceived, followed by the social level. Even in an intercultural setting, one's own cultural level will be the least readily perceived.

As can be seen in Figure 5, one important difference in the framework, as compared to perceiving the interaction partner, is that the prominence of the levels is in reversed order. Whereas in perceiving the interaction partner the cultural level is most prominent, followed by the social and the individual level, the perception of one's own role follows the opposite pattern. For example, people have a tendency to view their own role from their personal goals and motives. It is important to note that the reversed order does not imply that one's own cultural level is not important in the interaction. The opposite may even be the case, because lesser prominence implies also a decreased awareness of the impact of a level, which in turn diminishes the ability to correct for influences.

Our individual level, consisting of our personality, motivations, expectations, knowledge, and feelings and skills, can either willingly or unwillingly influence the interaction. Our own social roles (e.g., religious background, professional background, and military rank) can also influence the way in which we behave toward others. For example, being high in rank implies a high social status and more power. A high social status is associated with an increased social distance from others and a tendency to stereotype those below us (Smith & Trope, 2006). The cultural level consists of those norms and values that are part of one's own culture, and as such are incorporated in our thinking to a large extent. In fact, because they are shared by people in the same community, we do not question or even notice them. For instance, one of these values is the emphasis we place on individualism (a focus on the individual rather than the group; Triandis, 1995). Our individualistic norm leads us to expect that people should be able to take care of themselves. We are therefore surprised when people expect that we will take care of them. However, in a collectivistic culture, the idea that we should take care of each other is considered more rule than exception. This implies, for example, that sharing food with others is considered normal behaviour in one culture, and presumptuous in another.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Based upon the framework described thus far a general outline of preparation for KLE could be described as follows. Pre-deployment, basic training should not only discuss specific cultural knowledge, but should also include a thorough analysis of the interaction partner and our own characteristics following the framework by identifying cultural, social, and individual levels. This could help to assess our strength and weaknesses. An important difference that can be kept in mind is the difference in prominence of the level between the perception of the interaction partner (from the cultural to the social to the individual level) and the perception of the self (from the individual to the social to the cultural level). This difference in the level of prominence decreases the ability to identify and empathise with the interaction partner. Therefore, more effort has to be put into interacting on an individual level.

During preparation of a specific KLE while on a mission, it could be helpful to describe the interaction partner with the cultural, social, and individual levels in mind, and to arrange the information gathered accordingly. This could give some idea of how to relate and communicate with the interaction partner, and, if desired, could guide the choice of certain influencing techniques (see for example Cialdini, 2001). Within the context of the framework, negotiation could be helped by tapping into people's efforts for consistency, and the principles of scarcity, reciprocation, and cognitive dissonance. Relationships and trust could be built by using empathy, focusing on similarity, and generally abstaining from stereotyping.

The KLE itself is likely to consist of some 'getting to know' time. For the Afghan culture, this time could range from the first 10 minutes of a meeting to—more typically—several full meetings before remaining goals are discussed. The present framework could be especially helpful when an intervention is required during KLE. Examples are when there is a constant avoidance of talking about relevant issues, or when the interaction partner seems to get annoyed or angry. An intervention could consist of deliberately choosing another level to interact on, such as the social or the individual level. This could be a good way out of a potentially non-constructive interaction, but it could also be a way to get reconnected. It could be done by disclosing something out of one's individual or social level, or having a cup of tea. Then it will be more likely that the interaction partner will also disclose some information from the same level. At a certain point, remaining goals could be carefully reintroduced. An evaluation of the KLE could take place while keeping the framework in mind, which could guide and arrange advice and ideas about future KLEs with the same or other interaction partners.

To summarise, the framework illustrates that extensive knowledge of specific cultures is far less important than awareness of own cultural values, social position, and personal characteristics as well as the interaction partner's values, position and personality. Focusing on perception of the interaction partner diminishes the attention on culture as a determining factor in intercultural interactions. Commanders who have increased cultural awareness—and know how to use influence techniques taking into account cultural differences—can work effectively in all cultures.

'If you understand then you don't need to know specific habits.'

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